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*RESERVE IN MATTERS OF RELIGION*<sup>1</sup>

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I think it safe to assume—and I shall assume—that every college student has a certain amount of religious conviction and belief—more than we sometimes think—more perhaps than he is himself conscious of having. I am emboldened to say this because I believe that religion—that is, the relation of the human in us to the divine in us and above us—is a part of the essential nature of man, potential even though latent in every man, and because the Christian environment in which most college students have passed their early days must have called these potentialities into more or less distinct consciousness.

But what I recall in myself as a young man, and what I see in others, tells me that when this religious consciousness is made the object of appeal and of summons to expression and action it is very much inclined to withdraw within itself, and to fold itself about with reserve, and even to take on a kind of resistance. And when I examine this state of mind in myself and others, I think I can see that in a certain stage of spiritual immaturity, and perhaps more or less always, this reserve in religious expression is justifiable and even normal.

First, because religion itself is so largely a matter of mystery. The realities on which it rests are not matters of exact knowledge. We know only in part. The whole region is the domain of imagination and faith and spiritual vision, and is to be approached with wonder and awe and silence. The truly reverent spirit will not rush into its precincts with unseemly assurance. Faith itself will shrink from hasty affirmations. Something is to be said for a modest agnosticism: "Though desiring to know, and hoping to know, I do know but little as yet." How much better this than to say, either, on the one hand, "I know that I cannot know," or, on the other hand, "I know that I know," we mean-

<sup>1</sup>A Vesper Address to Students.

while questioning the reality of your knowledge, and not being convinced by your assurance.

Again, some degree of reserve may be pardoned as a natural and healthful reaction and protest in the face of much over-confident assertion and profession. When utterance on these high and solemn themes ceases to be cautious and modest, when religious avowals become voluble and loquacious, then very properly reserve comes to the rescue of sincerity, and says within the heart of the young man, "Beware of this! Keep well on the safe side of this!"

Again, religious consciousness rightly claims for itself certain sacred rights of privacy. The deeper our feelings on any subject, the less we are inclined to make confidants of others. There is a beautiful shyness in youth respecting very deep feeling, and most of all perhaps in respect to religion. *Maxima debetur reverentia*—the profoundest respect is due to the sacred intimacies of the young heart in its religious musings. Let us not misconstrue reserve as though it were necessarily apathy. Deep silences may hold what loud voices could never utter.

Have we now done full justice to this side of the subject—to the causes, the meaning, the merits, the rights, of reserve in matters of religion? If so, we may now look at some considerations on the other side.

First, when reserve passes a certain limit, and becomes actual repression of a genuine conviction or emotion, it works hurt to the moral nature. Modesty, reticence, is good: enforced dumbness is not good. We endanger our sincerity, certainly our frankness, when we put too heavy a restraint upon our convictions or our feelings. There are times when to suppress feeling is to induce and even cultivate stoicism. A confirmed habit of apathy is devitalizing. There are communities of Christians who suffer both spiritually and ethically from an abnormal dread of enthusiasm, as there are also those who suffer from forcing and counterfeit enthusiasm. Some poet—I forget who he is—has given us a person—a girl, I think—who is so oppressed by a secret she must not tell that she runs off and whispers it to the brook, and so relieves her heart. There are religious emotions which so

burden and oppress the heart, there are others which so exalt and inspire, that they must have expression. To stifle them is a harm and a wrong to the moral nature.

'Again, too great reticence in matters of religion is unsocial—may even be a social wrong. It is sometimes said that one's religion is something between one's own soul and God. It is that and something more. It is a source of new social relations and duties. Even when we have entered into our closet and shut the door, we are in thought to bring in others and say "Our Father." At one time in my youth I used to meet every day a very distinguished scholar of world-wide fame, who was known as an unbeliever, and allowed himself to be so known. This perplexed us young men. Here was a man of great ability, whom we admired as young men will admire a great man; and what we understood him to say to us was that for some untold reason he declined to be ranked as a Christian. But after his death, when his will was made public, we learned that he there made avowal of devout faith in Christ, an avowal which he had withheld because it would have been to his worldly advantage to make it. A beautiful and heroic act of self-denial, doubtless, but one in which a teacher of young men might have questioned his right to indulge himself. In place of helping us to settle one of the great questions of life in what he himself thought the right way, he, by his unnatural and easily misconstrued silence, hindered us from making a right decision. I suppose that all of us, according to our degree and light—we mature men and teachers, you young men and women, with far more power in certain ways to influence your fellows than we have—are all the time, whether we will or no, saying something to one another on this greatest of questions; saying it by silence as well as by speech, by withholding perhaps the simple, frank word which brotherhood and fair dealing would prompt us to say.

For when we come to think of it, while on one side religion is mystery, and tends to induce brooding and reverie rather than speech, on the other side it is hope, cheer, inspiration, power, life. The final word of religion is not silence but song. Personify religion, and you cannot imagine her speechless, dumb, a nun of La Trappe, as it were. She will rather be a St. Cecilia. It

is on this account that so much of the Bible is poetry; and that so large a part of the best poetry is religious. A man belies his religion if his habitual expression of it is reluctant and restrained and prosaic. Doctor Arnold maintained that even the creeds and confessions should be set to music and sung—that they are not syllogisms but lyrics. If you will look for it, you will find a good deal of theology in the “Te Deum”—more and better than in some creeds—but it is theology sublimated into religion, and given forth in great peals of song.

Can we now put our two thoughts together into some reconciling statement? Reserve in matters of religion is good in its place. That place is not where it covers voluntary apathy, or a spirit of indecision, or a distaste for the things of the Spirit. Let no one think that reserve is of such merit in itself that it condones an attitude of reluctance and aloofness toward religion itself. Reserve is in place when it affords a refuge from the persistence of opinion and emotion and action which may have the approval of one person, but which he has no right to force upon another; when one is brought into the presence of a great truth or a great movement, which for the time awes and stirs him, before which he stands waiting and expectant like the disciples when they were “all gathered together in one place” waiting for the Pentecostal impulse which gave them utterance; or, finally, when in all humility, and with some disappointment with self, one is conscious of a lack of inward response to a call which others find compelling, but to which one may not give simulated or counterfeited assent. There is no more pathetic situation in religious experience than that of the many persons who are silent and sad while others are filled with the Spirit, and who, notwithstanding, sit not in the seats of the scornful. And let us understand that always, even when at its best, reserve is provisional, a stage in progress, never a counsel of perfection.

And, finally, a word as to the claims and merits of utterance. Gardeners and florists find that the life of the plant depends as really on the leaves as on the root—indeed that the root itself depends as much on the leaves as the leaves on the root. Carry this principle up into the spiritual realm and it means that the

spiritual life cannot be healthy and growing without spiritual utterance in appropriate forms. The Psalmist says of the good man, "His leaf also shall not wither." To repress or minimize intellectual and emotional expression causes the inner life to shrivel and wither. Hence the pains which the Church has taken in all ages, following the example of our Lord himself, to encourage and guide religious utterance. Hence among the most precious and most prized gifts of the Spirit are those supremely great utterances of belief and praise and prayer which the saints, that is the gifted and superior souls, have left to us who have all their needs but gifts and attainments how far less than theirs! How poor spiritually should we be if deprived of them! How thankful are we that we have them! How ungrateful and unwise if we neglect them! It is open to question whether certain methods which encourage extremely immature Christians to give public utterance to their thoughts and feelings is spiritually wise. But the wisdom of the Church and of the Spirit has provided a more excellent way. In psalm and hymn and anthem; in the inspired utterances of patriarchs, prophets, apostles, evangelists, martyrs; in the biographies of devout men who have left records of their penitence, their consecration, their aspirations; we have an anthology of spiritual utterance from which we can appropriate confession, and trust, and hope, and praise, in accordance with our needs and desires. Why should we confine ourselves to an iteration of the little worn-out phrases of our particular conventicle, when we have full heritage in the oecumenical psalmody of devotion? Why should we be pleased and satisfied with the tinkle of the religious nursery, when all the pipes and stops of the great organ of spiritual melody are ours if we will only command them? When all the Church with its thousand voices is crying to us,

"O magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together," be it ours to respond,

"O Lord, open thou our lips, and our mouth shall show forth thy praise."